

Preparing our Next Generation of Primary Physical Educators

Introduction

The phrase ‘inspire a generation’ has been an enduring claim of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games (Griffiths and Armour 2013, Kohe and Bowen-Jones 2016, Parnell, Cope, Bailey & Widdop 2016). It has connected primary physical education and initial teacher education (ITE) through a number of national policies influencing the subject’s funding (DfE and EfA 2014) and teaching workforce (DfE 2015). Following another successful Games in Rio and an increase to the Primary PE and Sport Premium, it is timely to consider how prepared the future generation of primary physical educators are for the sustainability of this legacy. In this article I wish to present the main findings of a national research project examining the current landscape of primary physical education ITE in England. This project brought together a team across the physical education and school sport sector to: identify pre-service teachers (PSTs) confidence and willingness to teach primary physical education and the barriers and opportunities afforded to their development.

Primary Physical Education ITE

For many years ITE has received much criticism that programmes do not sufficiently prepare teachers to teach primary physical education (Caldecott, Warburton et al. 2006, Pickup 2006, Harris, Cale et al. 2012). Despite the collaborative nature of school-university partnership (Campbell, McNamara et al. 2007), only limited time is allocated to physical education within the university setting, which is further impeded by minimal opportunities to teach during the school-based placement (Caldecott, Warburton et al. 2006, Talbot 2007, Griggs 2015). With no current regulation for the amount of time that should be given to physical education during the ITE phase, student experience is variable. Blair and Capel (2011) have cited as little as five hours in some institutions with Elliot, Atencio et al. (2013) noting a variation between 0 – 15 hours. In the most recently revised Ofsted ITE inspection handbook (2015: 38-39), an expectation of providers is made:

[Trainees should] Teach physical education and demonstrate good subject knowledge and teaching strategies, including for pupils/learners with special educational needs.

Many reasons have been offered for physical education’s apparent low status during ITE compared with other curriculum areas (Shaughnessy and Price 1995, Warburton 2000, Morgan and Bourke 2008). This has been attributed to a large number of lessons being cancelled (Pickup 2006), a significant number of classroom teachers and mentors expressing a difficulty in teaching the subject (Morgan and Bourke 2008) and limited space/facilities in schools to deliver regular physical education programmes (Harris, Cale et al. 2011). Since the implementation of the Workforce Reform Act (DfES 2003), an increase in PSTs undertaking their planning preparation and assessment (PPA) time during the timetabled physical education lesson has been noted, with lessons increasingly being delivered by outside providers (Blair and Capel 2008, Griggs 2010, Blair and Capel 2011, Griggs and Ward 2012, Adams 2015). These factors have resulted in many PSTs receiving inadequate opportunities to develop their professional knowledge, resulting in low levels of confidence and competence to teach (Katene and Edmondson 2004, Caldecott, Warburton et al. 2006).

In a study of 200 primary generalist trainees, Haydn-Davies, Kaitell et al. (2010) confirmed that a quarter of the sample reported no opportunity to teach physical education when on a school placement. The study further concluded that there was a lack of enthusiasm in schools for physical education, poor mentoring and a lack of good practice teaching examples. Although the quality of physical education ITE does not solely rely upon the volume of contact time of taught sessions, or the number of lessons experienced in school, Pickup (2006) argues it is the 'philosophical positioning' of underpinning theory with practice that is important. The view that PSTs will acquire competence in physical education by receiving both school and university inputs is problematic, as assumptions can be made about who is responsible for developing aspects of a teacher's knowledge (Menzies and Jordan-Daus 2012, Randall 2016). With accountability for teacher competence in ITE moving more towards school-based experience, a shared understanding of what constitutes quality provision and who is responsible for areas of professional knowledge across the partnership, is needed (Haydn-Davies, Kaitell et al. 2010, Adams 2015, Randall 2016).

Research Approach

An online survey was used to obtain large scale data across 22 ITE providers in England. The collection of quantitative data aimed to identify levels of PSTs' confidence across a breadth of professional knowledge areas, their opportunity to observe and teach physical education lessons and their willingness to engage in the subject. Qualitative data aimed to identify perceived positive experiences as well as barriers from within primary ITE programmes. All participants who took part in the study were enrolled on a programme of primary education leading to the recommendation for the award of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) during 2015/2016. The study was carried out over two phases. A total of 1118 responses were obtained in phase one and a further 625 in phase two. Participants were represented from university undergraduate, post-graduate and school-based programmes.

Main findings

- nearly 50% of PSTs in phase one and over 30% in phase two taught 0 lessons of physical education during their most recent school-based placement
- those who were on a specialist route were more likely to teach and observe physical education than their generalist peers. PSTs' cited that opportunities were given to specialists over generalists, from within the same setting
- a varied workforce was involved in the delivery of primary physical education. Sports coaches were the most frequently cited deliverer of physical education second to the class teacher
- only 2.3% of physical education lessons were taught by sports coaches with a class teacher present
- 35% received no feedback about their teaching of physical education
- most received 6 – 10 hours of taught input on primary physical education. School-based routes offered less (1 – 5 hours) and university-based routes typically offered more (21+ hours)

- confidence levels across all programmes was highest in areas of knowledge relating to health, fitness and well-being, safe practice, fundamental movement skills and games activities. Confidence was lowest in areas of knowledge relating to swimming activities and assessment.

Positives Experiences

A total of 16 themes were identified from 538 responses relating to positive experiences; although many (n=123) were unable to leave any positive comments at all. The most frequently occurring theme was pupil enjoyment/engagement in the subject; however reasons for this were rarely developed beyond the language of 'fun' and 'enjoyable'. The second most prominent theme was when an opportunity to teach a lesson had been given, followed by: help with planning, receiving feedback and gaining practical experience of teaching in different environments. Participants also articulated that a diverse workforce teaching physical education in primary schools offered a range of practice to observe. When facilitated well, this led to improved enthusiasm, a clear structure of lessons, improved knowledge of taught skills, learning through a range of activities, active and engaged learners and an understanding of competition. Of particular benefit was when the class teacher and coach had worked together to show a partnered delivery for learning (however this was rarely observed).

Barriers for Development

A total of 13 themed barriers from 462 responses were identified relating to barriers that impeded development. The most frequently occurring theme was 'no opportunity' to engage with physical education and was characterised through not teaching, observing and planning lessons. Being able to apply theory and learning into practice was a further distinction of this theme. Some comments also raised concern about the legalities of teaching physical education when on placement. Beliefs were held that physical education was a subject that was not allowed to be taught during a school placement.

Outsourcing of physical education was the second most cited barrier; it also regularly appeared in the theme of PPA time, as sports coaches used to cover teachers' release from the timetable. When the opportunity had arisen for the PST to work with a sports coach (or equiv.), this was often in an observational or supporting capacity only.

"I was unable to teach as there was an external coach who taught PE during their [the class's] only PE lesson (once a week) which was also my PPA time" (School Direct Student)

"The lessons were taught by a sports coach so couldn't really get involved" (Undergraduate Student)

"Coaches were in once or twice a week to teach so I was unable to teach as much as I wanted" (PGCE Student)

The nature of sports coaches being payment through hourly employment meant less opportunity for the PST to discuss subject-related matters before, after or between lessons. A number of comments further referred to outsourced lessons being observations of coaching rather than teaching.

Conclusion

At the relative stage of training, this research identified that PSTs are confident and willing to teach primary physical education. This was supported by a number of positive factors from their ITE experiences that contributed to development of confidence across the professional knowledge base (see Randall, 2015). The most prominent of these factors were children's enjoyment of the subject, an opportunity to teach when in school and learning from a diverse and skilled workforce. However, a number of barriers persisted, many of which came from the school setting. Having no opportunity to teach, the wide spread use of curriculum outsourcing and poor quality mentoring were the most frequently cited barriers. Concerns were strongly linked to the value of the subject in schools and the allocation of a PSTs' PPA time during curriculum physical education. Of most and immediate concern from these findings has been the fragmentation of the workforce, the lack of coherence in policy and a growing polarisation between specialist and generalist teachers. Although this study did not ask questions about the Primary PE and Sport Premium directly, insights from the PSTs have indicated many schools are using the Premium to further outsource the curriculum without the teacher and/or PST being present. Current guidance suggests the Premium should be used to upskill in-service-teachers (DfE, 2013), but this has been juxtaposed with another Government initiative to train specialist primary physical education through school-led ITE (NCTL, 2015). This has further reinforced the notion that physical education is a 'specialist' area of the curriculum to teach. Rather than addressing competency and confidence for all primary educators, these two political initiatives seem to be encouraging a greater polarisation within the teaching workforce.

Recommendations and Reflection

I believe these findings have number of implications at a political, institutional and individual level if we are to truly bequest a future of high quality primary physical education. Setting aside any ideological bias towards particular models of ITE, or a belief about who is best to teach the subject, recommendations from this research calls for: joined-up policy decisions around primary physical education and ITE, which places placed high quality delivery central to future subject outcomes; a core content curriculum for primary physical education ITE, to ensure consistency of provision across the sector; a minimum statutory engagement for the subject at the ITE phase and a focus on practitioner-led self-auditing. These recommendations should facilitate the future preparation of teachers regardless of their initial starting points and encourage a sustainable infrastructure for life-long professional learning.

Post Script

The research team would like to thank all ITE providers and PSTs who took part in this research. We would also like to thank the Physical Education Expert Subject Advisory Group, the Association for Physical Education and the Youth Sport Trust for their interest in the project and for ensuring ITE continues to be recognised in wider discussions at a national level.

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